

Editors' ForumHot Spots

Sinophobia, Epidemics, and Interspecies Catastrophe

FROM THE SERIES: [Responding to an Unfolding Pandemic: Asian Medicines and Covid-19](#)

By [Christos Lynteris](#)
June 23, 2020
Publication Information +



Since January 2020, the Covid-19 pandemic has been accompanied by a wave of racist, xenophobic incidents targeting people perceived by their attackers as Chinese or Asian. A source of particular alarm is the [reported pattern of bullying and attacking individuals as “viruses.”](#) This has led to an online campaign using #IAmNotaVirus, aimed at resisting the dehumanization of targeted groups and individuals and at building solidarity around those faced with Sinophobic harassment and violence. As Sinophobia becomes more prominent in public discourse, it is important to identify its underlying tropes and the ways in which they lead to the stigmatization of individuals and communities. A key characteristic of Sinophobia, and one pertinent for understanding its resurgence in the context of Covid-19, is that since its original formation, by the end of the nineteenth century, it has been especially related to the fear of epidemics.

Yellow Peril and Epidemics

The nineteenth century saw the establishment of China in Western imagination as the “Sick Man of Asia” and at the same time as the origin of infectious diseases like plague (Lynteris 2018) and smallpox (Craddock 1995; Heinrich 2007), which were beginning to be understood in terms of bacteriology. The outbreak of plague in the British colony of Hong Kong in 1894 and the spread of the disease across the globe in what came to be known as the third plague pandemic played a catalytic role in this identification of China as the breeding ground of pandemics (Echenberg 2007). This global pandemic unfolded at the height of the Yellow Peril, and played an important role in its development (Lynteris 2018). The identification of Chinese urban spaces, especially Chinatowns, as the “breeding grounds” of plague (Lynteris 2017; Engelmann 2018), and of the bodies of Chinese migrants, even Chinese objects (Peckham 2016), as catalysts of contagion was linked at the time with an understanding of China as an empire in decay. Associated with ideas of racial degeneration prevalent at the time, this image fostered an idea that diseases that were supposed to belong to humanity’s past, like plague, festered in China, and thus threatened the modern world with a relapse to the middle ages. Nowhere was the violent force of epidemic-related Sinophobia felt more strongly than in the United States, where the arrival of plague in Honolulu led to the torching of the city’s Chinatown (Mohr 2005), and the 1900 outbreak of plague in San Francisco (Shah 2001; Risse 2012) led to extensive stigmatization of its large Chinese community.

Yellow Peril and the fear of diseases originating in China and spread by Chinese migrants, Chinese urban structures and Chinese objects were intricately interlinked with the forging of modern understandings of epidemics. And yet, while it is important to recognize that the fear of epidemics has been a constitutive element of Sinophobia since its emergence in Europe and North America, it would be mistaken to assume that Sinophobia is simply a relic from the nineteenth century. In reality, what has happened since is that on the basis of the original xenophobic connection between Sinophobia and the fear of epidemics, a new edifice has emerged in the twenty-first century, one that is connected with new fears of China, and new ideas about infectious diseases.

Fearing Emergence

Remaining latent for decades, the “epidemic Sinophobia” complex returned to the forefront of the West’s approach to China in the context of the SARS pandemic of 2003. However, this was not simply a repetition of the fears and bigotry developed a century earlier. This was for two reasons. First, China was no longer feared in the same manner as in the Age of Empire. Rather than being seen as a moribund state, in its new one-party-state capitalist guise, China was seen as a rapidly developing economy that threatened to eventually overtake Western democracies. The fear of China’s “emergence,” rather than “degeneration,” was tied to a similarly new epidemiological framing of infectious diseases. In the half century following the development of bacteriology, the fear of epidemics focused on a set of well-known diseases, such as plague, cholera, yellow fever, and smallpox. These were seen as ancient foes of humanity that could be eventually rendered impotent via the application of modern medicine and sanitation. The future of humanity was seen as essentially disease-free, that is, once pockets of imagined backwardness that provided the “breeding grounds” for these diseases, like China, became modernized. This hygienic-utopian vision was, however, rendered moot by the development of the Emerging Infectious Diseases framework in the early 1990s. No longer conceiving microbiological threat as deriving from a finite set of pathogenic agents, but understanding “nature” as a perpetual workshop of new diseases, epidemiologists abandoned the hope of prevention and eradication, and the vision of a disease-free humanity. Instead, the only thing we could do against emerging pathogens was to “prepare” (Lakoff 2015).

At the junction of fears of emerging pathogens and the economic and political emergence of China stood a figure that acted as a symbolic switch between the old Sinophobic fears of the Yellow Peril, and the new emergence-focused ones: wet markets, or markets selling live farmed and sometimes wild animals. These were indicted during SARS as the source of the emergence of SARS-CoV, with the spillover between animals and humans being mediated by civet cats, sold in South China’s markets (Lynteris 2016). Though studies have identified potential animal reservoirs of SARS-CoV-2 related viruses (Lam et al. 2020; Ye et al. 2020), to date no study has managed to identify the original zoonotic infection leading to Covid-19 or whether this took place in a wet market. Yet the initial notion that the pandemic originated in Wuhan’s Huanan Seafood and Wholesale Market re-ignited the image of Chinese wet markets as the breeding grounds of emerging pathogens and human pandemics.

Often misrepresented as being primarily spaces for the sale of poached live wild animals, wet markets are in fact mainly selling points of farmed, live and butchered animals upon which, in several areas of the country, large sections of the low-to-middle income population rely for subsistence (Maruyama, Wu, and Huang 2016; Lynteris and Fearnley 2020). What makes wet markets ideal symbolic switches for Sinophobia is the fact that, on the one hand, they have been associated with disease emergence in the past, while, on the other hand, they can be conveniently portrayed by Western media as essentially barbaric locales, where animals that “should not be consumed by humans” are slaughtered, sold alive, and allowed to mix with one another in a phantasmagoria of matter out of place that would make Mary Douglas blush. Nothing seems to ignite more indignation in the West during Covid-19 than the image of wet markets—their very existence being seen as an affront to humanity. Imbued with Orientalist hues, what are in fact rather ordinary-looking and—from my own ethnographic experience involving their inspection with the China CDC—usually regulated spaces of exchange, are clad with properties of secrecy, obscurity, and complicity, tying in emergence and degeneration is a racist meta-complex. Covid-19 as an interspecies catastrophe is thus eventually attributed to Chinese culture, and its supposed inability or unwillingness to embrace “our” modernity, while marching ahead in a path of its own, imagined as reckless by some Western audiences. Only if China could become *really* modern, this new Sinophobic narrative seems to suggest—that is, if only it could simply emulate the Western way of life (qua way of exchange and consumption)—then the world would be safe.

References

Craddock, Susan. 1995. “[Sewers and Scapegoats: Spatial Metaphors of Smallpox in Nineteenth Century San Francisco.](#)” *Social Science and Medicine* 41, no. 7: 957–68.

Echenberg, Myron. 2007. *Plague Ports: The Global Urban Impact of Bubonic Plague, 1894–1901*. New York: New York University Press.

Engelmann, Lukas. 2018. “A Source of Sickness.” Photographic Mapping of the Plague in Honolulu in 1900.’ In *Plague and the City*, edited by Lukas Engelmann, John Henderson, and Christos Lynteris, 139–58. London: Routledge.

Heinrich, Larissa. 2007. “[How China Became the ‘Cradle of Smallpox’: Transformations in Discourse, 1726–2002.](#)” *Positions* 15, no. 1: 7–34.

Lakoff, Andrew. 2015. *Unprepared: Global Health in a Time of Emergency*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Lam, Tommy Tsan-Yuk, Marcus Ho-Hin Shum, Hua-Chen Zhu, Yi-Gang Tong, Xue-Bing Ni, Yun-Shi Liao, Wei Wei, William Yiu-Man Cheung, Wen-Juan Li, Lian-Feng Li, Gabriel M. Leung, Edward C. Holmes, Yan-Ling Hu, and Yi Guan. 2020. “[Identifying SARS-CoV-2 Related Coronaviruses in Malaysian Pangolins.](#)” *Nature*.

Lynteris, Christos. 2016. “[The Prophetic Faculty of Epidemic Photography: Chinese Wet Markets and the Imagination of the Next Pandemic.](#)” Special issue, “Medicine, Photography and Anthropology,” *Visual Anthropology* 29, no. 2: 118–32.

———. 2017. “[A ‘Suitable Soil’: Plague’s Breeding Grounds at the Dawn of the Third Pandemic.](#)” *Medical History* 61, no. 3: 343–57.

———. 2018. “Yellow Peril Epidemics: The Political Ontology of Degeneration and Emergence.” In *Yellow Perils: China Narratives in the Contemporary World*, edited by Frank Billé and Sören Urbansky, 35–59. Honolulu: Hawaii University Press.

Lynteris, Christos, and Lyle Fearnley. 2020. “[Why Shutting Down Chinese ‘Wet Markets’ Could Be a Terrible Mistake.](#)” *The Conversation*, January 31.

Maruyama, Masayoshi, Lihui Wu, and Lin Huang. 2016. “[The Modernization of Fresh Food Retailing in China: The Role of Consumers.](#)” *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services* 30: 33–39.

Mohr, James C. 2005. *Plague and Fire: Battling Black Death and the 1900 Burning of Honolulu’s Chinatown*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Peckham, Robert. 2016. “[Hong Kong Junk: Plague and the Economy of Chinese Things.](#)” *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 90, no. 1: 32–60.

Risse, Guenter B. 2012. *Plague, Fear, and Politics in San Francisco’s Chinatown*. Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Shah, Nayan. 2001. *Contagious Divides: Epidemics and Race in San Francisco’s Chinatown*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Ye, Zi-Wei, Shuofeng Yuan, Kit-San Yuen, Sin-Yee Fung, Chi-Ping Chan, and Dong-Yan Jin. 2020. “[Zoonotic Origins of Human Coronaviruses.](#)” *International Journal of Biological Sciences* 16, no. 10: 1686–97.

[Back to Series Description](#)